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Ecotourism in the Greek islands: Lost in vagueness

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1/ Ecotourism in the Greek islands: Lost in vagueness

Maria SAKELLARI

This paper provides a description of the development and present practices of ecotourism in the Greek islands. For the purpose, it digs into peer-review literature and policy documents focusing on economic, social, and environmental aspects of ecotourism in Greece and in general, and the problems faced to meet its objectives. The paper also discusses the implications for the future of ecotourism in the Greek islands and the country in general within the context of the on-going economic crisis and the austerity framework, and identifies how the vision of ecotourism should be pursued. A participatory tourism development approach, environmental education and capacity building for the professional development of local communities in the context of environmental conservation and ecotourism, can help to provide an alternative to the exploitative use of environmental resources and support the transfer of the tangible benefits of ecotourism to local communities. This paper suggests that this vision of sustainable tourism and ecotourism development should be founded on new schemes and policies for Greece incorporating citizenship rights, challenging market individualism towards a common environmental good concept and deepening representation and transparency.

1. Introduction

The concept of sustainable development has gained traction in tourism debates as a way to address the contradictions between tourism development on one hand and environmental protection on the other. This means that if tourism is to contribute to sustainable development, then it must be economically viable, ecologically sensitive, and culturally appropriate¹. Critical questions remain, however, how this change to sustainable tourism will mutate as it is translated from a theoretical concept into sets of normative actions and how this process might influence social, political and environmental change².

¹ WALL, Geoffrey, «Is ecotourism sustainable?», in *Environmental Management*, 21, 4/1997, pp. 483-491.

² BLYTHE, Jessica, SILVER, Jennifer, EVANS, Louisa et al., «The Dark Side of Transformation: Latent Risks in Contemporary Sustainability Discourse», in *Antipode*, 50, 5/2018, pp. 1206-1223; SAKELLARI, Maria, SKANAVIS, Constantina, «Sustainable tourism development: Environmental Education as a tool to fill the gap between theory and practice», in *International Journal of Environment and Sustainable Development*, XII, 4/2013, pp. 313-323.

Motivated by these questions, the notion of ecotourism is gaining traction in sustainable tourism debates. Ecotourism is defined as the responsible tourism in natural areas able to facilitate conservation objectives³. In this regard, ecotourism should minimize environmental impact, have a small ecological ‘footprint’ and contribute to conservation through direct efforts like reforestation, habitat restoration and to local socio-economic development through financial benefits, such employment opportunities from conservation spin-offs⁴. As such, protected areas, for instance, constitute a significant market for ecotourism. But, there is empirical evidence that planners and administrators of protected areas face increasing challenges in managing the popularity of these areas as tourism destinations while ensuring their ecological integrity⁵.

Moreover, the loose description of tourism transformation within the sustainability discourse has raised concerns that it directs efforts towards building the resilience of the existing system rather than transforming it and as a consequence provides another means to justify business-as-usual approaches⁶. For instance, there is empirical evidence that inequitable distribution of income among the locals⁷, cultural erosion⁸ and inability to ensure long-term protection of environmental assets⁹, are some of the problems associated with the development of ecotourism internationally. Ecotourism has received criticism that it is closely related to free-market, a business that has to compete along with other businesses and focuses on profit instead of on conservation¹⁰ and that in some cases produces negative impacts on natural resources¹¹. However, despite criticism, the field of ecotourism remains very popular among tourism theorists and

³ TISDELL, Clem, WILSON, Cleve, «Perceived impacts of ecotourism on environmental learning and conservation: turtle watching as a case study», in *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 7, 3/2005, pp. 291-302; YU, Douglas W., HENDRICKSON, Thomas, CASTILLO, Ada, «Ecotourism and conservation in Amazonian Peru: short term and long-term challenges», in *Environmental Conservation*, 24, 2/1997, pp. 130-138; MAHARANA UPRENY, Iyatta, RAI, Suresh Chand, SHARMA, Eklabia, «Valuing ecotourism in a sacred lake of the Sikkim Himalaya, India», in *Environmental Conservation*, 27, 3/2000, pp. 269-277.

⁴ ALMEYDA ZAMBRANO, Angelica M., BROADBENT, Eben, DURHAM, William, «Social and environmental effects of ecotourism in the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica: the Lapa Rios case», in *Journal of Ecotourism*, IX, 1/2010, pp. 62-83.

⁵ SAKELLARI, Maria, «Film tourism and ecotourism: mutually exclusive or compatible?», in *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, VIII, 2/2014, pp. 194-202; SKANAVIS, Constantina, SAKELLARI, Maria, «International tourism, domestic tourism and environmental change: Environmental Education can find the balance», in *Tourismos*, 6, 1/2011, pp. 233-249.

⁶ BLYTHE, Jessica, SILVER, Jennifer, EVANS, Louisa et al., *op. cit.*

⁷ HE, Guangming, CHEN, Xiaodong, LIU, Wei et al., «Distribution of economic benefits from ecotourism: A case study of Wolong Nature Reserve for Giant Pandas in China», in *Environmental Management*, 42, 6/2008, pp. 1017-1025.

⁸ WUNDER, Sven, «Ecotourism and economic incentives – An empirical approach», in *Ecological Economics*, 32, 3/2000, pp. 465-479.

⁹ ISAACS, Jack Coburn, «The limited potential of ecotourism to contribute to wildlife conservation», in *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, 28, 1/2000, pp. 61-69.

¹⁰ DUFFY, Rosaleen, *A trip too far: Ecotourism, politics and exploitation*, London, Earthspan, 2002.

¹¹ BALLANTYNE, Mark, PICKERING, Catherine, «Ecotourism as a threatening process for wild orchids», in *Journal of ecotourism*, XI, 1/2012, pp. 34-47.

practitioners as a form of tourism that minimizes the negative aspects of conventional tourism on the environment and the cultural identity of local communities¹².

The declaration by the United Nations of 2002 as the “International Year of Ecotourism” marked a major rise of ecotourism¹³. Later on, the UN General Assembly adopted several resolutions recognizing the contribution of ecotourism to poverty eradication, community development, and biodiversity protection¹⁴. Today, it is one of the fastest growing tourism markets globally¹⁵. A debate exists in the literature on ecotourism whether the growth of ecotourism is driven by supply or demand¹⁶, but there is empirical evidence of tourists becoming ‘greener’ and increasing demand of ecotourism activities¹⁷.

In Greece, ecotourism constitutes a small part of the country’s tourism market¹⁸. Even though there are significant problems associated with mass tourism development, such as environmental degradation and adverse socio-economic and cultural changes within local communities, the concept of ecotourism remains poorly understood and much abused ever since it has been implemented across the country. Moreover, due to the on-going economic crisis matters are different today when people in Greece do not have the same financial resources to travel, Greek cities present signs of deprivation and immobility and popular tourist imaginaries of Greece include landscapes of poverty¹⁹. These circumstances possibly explain the scarcity of research on the qualitative and quantitative features of ecotourism in Greece.

Thus, this paper aims to advance knowledge of the multifaceted approach of ecotourism in Greece. In this regard, the Greek islands provide a natural choice of case with which to explore the development of ecotourism in Greece. Tourism development in the country has mostly

¹² SAKELLARI, Maria, «Film tourism and ecotourism: mutually exclusive or compatible?», cit.

¹³ WEAVER, David Bruce, LAWTON, Laura Jane, «Twenty years on: The state of contemporary ecotourism research», in *Tourism Management*, XXVIII, 5/2007, pp. 1168-1179; BUTCHER, Jim, «The United Nations International Year of Ecotourism: A critical analysis of development implications», in *Progress in Development Studies*, VI, 2/2006, pp. 146-156.

¹⁴ UNITED NATION GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *Promotion of ecotourism for poverty eradication and environment protection, Resolution 67/223 adopted by the General Assembly on 21 December 2012*, 2013; ID., *Promotion of sustainable tourism, including ecotourism, for poverty eradication and environment protection, Resolution 69/233 adopted by the General Assembly on 19 December 2014*, 2015.

¹⁵ HULTMAN, Magnus, KAZEMINIA, Azadeh, GHASEMI, Vahid, «Intention to visit and willingness to pay premium for ecotourism: The impact of attitude, materialism, and motivation», in *Journal of Business Research*, LXVIII, 9/2015, pp. 1854-1861.

¹⁶ PERKINS, Helen, GRACE, Debra Ann, «Ecotourism: supply of nature or tourist demand?», in *Journal of Ecotourism*, VIII, 3/2009, pp. 223-236.

¹⁷ SAKELLARI, Maria, «Film tourism and ecotourism: mutually exclusive or compatible?», cit.; ID., «Mediation of a destination’s environmental image: a consideration of a negative portrayal», in *Journal of Tourism and Development*, XV, 27/28, 1/2017, pp. 2137-2147.

¹⁸ SVORONOU, Eleni, HOLDEN, Andrew, «Ecotourism as a tool for nature conservation: The role of WWF Greece in the Dadia-Lefkimi-Soufli Forest Reserve in Greece», in *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, XIII, 5/2005, pp. 456-467.

¹⁹ TZANELLI, Rodanthi, KORSTANJE, Maximiliano, «Tourism in the European economic crisis: Mediatized worldmaking and new tourist imaginaries in Greece», in *Tourist Studies*, XVI, 3/2016, pp. 296-314.

concentrated on the islands. Natural and cultural assets found in the Greek islands are significant attractions for tourists from all over the world. As such, tourism plays a vital role in islands' local economies presenting some advantages, namely through job creation, tax revenues and increased value of local products²⁰. However, mass tourism development exerts severe pressures for local communities and natural habitats. The Greek islands encounter particular challenges due to their isolation, limited physical space and natural resources, e.g., small catchments and low rainfall, which increase their vulnerability to threats such as mass tourism-driven overexploitation of natural resources and urbanization²¹. Thus, the Greek islands represent the challenge of our time: how to balance ecological integrity with tourism development and collective quality of life²². Through this, the paper also fills an important gap in current scholarship on ecotourism development in the Mediterranean, as ecotourism efficacy in Greece remains largely unexplored.

In overview, the paper performs a literature review to provide a description of the evolution and present practices of ecotourism in the Greek islands. For this purpose, it digs into peer-review literature and policy documents focusing on economic, social, and environmental aspects of ecotourism. In particular, the paper first explores the evolution of ecotourism in Greece and the problems faced to meet its objectives. Then, it draws on the case of the Greek islands to provide insight into the experience of ecotourism and the impacts of its mis-utilization. Finally, the paper discusses the implications for the future of ecotourism in the Greek islands and the country in general and identifies how the vision of ecotourism should be pursued.

2. The evolution of ecotourism in Greece

Greece, located in the centre of the Mediterranean, is one of the main tourist destinations worldwide. Tourism plays a significant part in the national economy. In particular, it accounted for an estimated 27.3% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 16.9% of employment in 2017²³. Regarding international tourist arrivals, Greece ranked 15th in the world in 2014²⁴.

²⁰ SCHUBERT, Stefan Franz, BRIDA, Juan Gabriel, RISSO, Winston Adrián, «The impacts of international tourism demand on economic growth of small economies dependent on tourism», in *Tourism Management*, XXXII, 2/2011, pp. 377-385; SEETANAH, Boopen, «Assessing the dynamic economic impact of tourism for island economies», in *Annals of Tourism Research*, XXXVIII, 1/2011, pp. 291-308.

²¹ RIETBERGEN, Simon, HAMMOND, Tom, SAYEGHT, Chucrí et al. (eds.), *Island voices island choices: Developing strategies for living with rapid ecosystem change in small islands*, Gland, IUCN, 2007.

²² BALDACCHINO, Godfrey, NILES, Daniel (eds.), *Island Futures: Conservation and Development Across the Asia-Pacific Region*, Tokyo, Springer, 2011, p. 182.

²³ ΙΚΚΟΣ, Άρης, ΚΟΥΤΣΟΣ, Σεραφείμ, *Η συμβολή του Τουρισμού στην ελληνική οικονομία το 2017 [Il contributo del turismo all'economia greca nel 2017]*, s.l., SETE intelligence, 2018, URL: < http://www.insete.gr/Portals/0/meletes-INSETE/01/2018_SymvolhTourismou-2017.pdf > [consultato il 3 agosto 2019].

²⁴ WORLD TOURISM ORGANISATION, *UNWTO World Tourism Barometer*, XIII, 6/2015, URL: < http://tourlib.net/wto/UNWTO_Barometer_2015_06.pdf > [consultato il 18 agosto 2019].

The continuing expansion of the tourist phenomenon in Greece during the last five decades was rapid, resulting to the enormous phenomenon of ‘mass tourism’ with different consequences with harmful effects²⁵. This peaceful ‘invasion’ of other cultures in the country affected every aspect of everyday life, from self-awareness and local culture to the natural environment²⁶. Urbanization, coastal pollution, the sprawl of often illegal summerhouses and rooms-to-let, attraction of a range of diverse economic activities and the high density of roads and other transport infrastructure are some of the tourism-driven threats that exert considerable pressure on the natural environment of the country²⁷.

The negative impacts of mass tourism development in Greece have been recognized since the early 1990s²⁸. Policy efforts to differentiate the tourist product towards more sustainable practices were developed during the 1990s and 2000s, but these were motivated by the European Union’s initiatives and funding schemes instead of a national policy plan. For instance, under the framework of LEADER, one of the most proactive European Union’s programs operating under the umbrella of the Common Agricultural and Rural Development Policy, alternative tourism, including ecotourism, activities were set up in many rural areas in Greece²⁹. In 2013, the ‘National Strategic Plan for Tourism’ introduced a policy plan for tourism development for the period 2014–2020, that consists of thematic objectives, some of them linked directly with sustainable development goals such as energy efficiency, climate change adaptation and environmental conservation³⁰. But, this has yet to be translated into concrete policy actions, revealing a gap between theory and practice of sustainable tourism development³¹. In overview, tourism policies in Greece remain vague and generic on the prospects and potential of ecotourism development in the country.

Ecotourism experienced significant growth in Greece during the 1990s, although the first ecotourism activities had already appeared in Greece from the 1980s³². In particular, signs of

²⁵ WILLIAMS, Allan, SHAW, Gareth, *Tourism and the environment: sustainability and economic restructuring*, in HALL, Michael Colin, LEW, Alan A (eds.), *Sustainable Tourism: a Geographical Perspective*, New York, Addison Wesley Longman, 1998, pp. 49-59; SKANAVIS, Constantina, SAKELLARI, Maria, «International tourism, domestic tourism and environmental change: Environmental Education can find the balance», cit.

²⁶ CONSTANTINIDIS, Stratos E., «Greek film and the national interest: a brief preface», in *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, XVIII, 1/2000, pp. 1-12.

²⁷ SAKELLARI, Maria, SKANAVIS, Constantina, *op. cit.*

²⁸ BUHALIS, Dimitrios, «Tourism in Greece: Strategic Analysis and Challenges», in *Current Issues in Tourism*, IV, 5/2011, pp. 440-480.

²⁹ IAKOVIDOU, Olga, KOUTSOURIS, Alexandros, PARTALIDOU, Maria, «The Development of Rural Tourism in Greece, Through the Initiative LEADER II: the Case of Northern and Central Chalkidiki», in *New Medit*, I, 4/2002, pp. 32-38.

³⁰ GREEK MINISTRY OF TOURISM, *National Strategic Plan for Tourism 2014-2020*, 2013.

³¹ SAKELLARI, Maria, SKANAVIS, Constantina, *op. cit.*

³² SVORONOU, Eleni, HOLDEN, Andrew, *op. cit.*; AVGERINOY-KOLONIAS Sofia, TOUFENGOPOULOU, Anastasia, SPYROPOULOS, Ioannis, «Basic questions of ecotourism in Greece: Demand and supply, management bodies, enterprises», in *Tourismos*, 11, 3/2016, pp. 133-156.

interest in ecotourism can be traced to the 1970s. During that decade both foreign and Greek nature specialists, alpinists and hikers started to use the Greece countryside for leisure and tourism pursuits. The popularity of the countryside grew during the 1980s and 1990s as adventure tourism based upon kayaking, rafting, trekking, and other similar sports become fashionable. This trend was representative of new niche markets that developed worldwide alongside mass tourism at that time. One of these was ecotourism, and the term became established in the Greek tourism market by the late 1980s.

Ecotourism in Greece bases its operation in the small enterprises that are usually family businesses, and most of the ecotourism entrepreneurs are occasional, in that they likely are to be involved in many other tourist activities³³. Ecotourists are also occasional because they are engaged in other forms of tourism, in addition to ecotourism³⁴. For domestic tourists, ecotourism is preferable for short duration vacations, which are becoming consistently more preferred as a choice for travellers, particularly from the two main urban centres of the country, namely, Athens and Thessaloniki³⁵. International ecotourists travel by road from neighbouring countries mostly to ecotourism sites in northern Greece, or they are occasional, engaged in mass tourism as well as in ecotourism. Ecotourism activities are primarily developed within protected areas such as Ramsar and Natura 2000 sites. In particular, Ramsar and Natura 2000 intercountry environmental networks are designed to create best practices for the maintenance and restoration of local biodiversity. These networks consist of various areas across the country such as the forest reserve of Dadia, Prespes, Kerkini, and Plastira lakes, the mountain of Pindos, the deltas of Evros and Nestos rivers in the mainland and the gorge of Samaria in the island of Crete. Also, as agrotourism is often considered as part of ecotourism and vice versa, the development of women's agrotourism cooperatives focused on the promotion of local products, traditions, and cultural heritage could also be used as a paradigm of ecotourism development in Greece. The concept of agrotourism, as used in Greece, embraces tourism activities carried out in non-urban regions by individuals mainly employed in the primary or secondary sector of the economy³⁶. Such activities typically involve small tourism units of family or cooperative type, which offer

³³ SKANAVIS, Constantina, GIANNOULIS, Christos, «A training model for environmental educators and interpreters employed in Greek protected areas and ecotourism settings», in *International Journal of Sustainable Development and World Ecology*, XVI, 3/2009, pp. 164-176.

³⁴ DIAMANTIS, Dimitrios, «Ecotourism and Sustainability in Mediterranean Islands», in *Thunderbird International Business Review*, XLII, 4/2000, pp. 427-443.

³⁵ TSARTAS, Paris, MANOLOGLOU, Evdokia, MARKOU, Anna, «Domestic Tourism in Greece and Special Interest Destinations: The Role of Alternative Forms of Tourism», in *Anatolia*, XII, 1/2001, pp. 35-42.

³⁶ SKANAVIS, Constantina, SAKELLARI, Maria, «Gender and sustainable tourism: Women's participation in the environmental decision-making process», cit.

accommodations, goods, and other services and provide an additional income for rural families and/or an independent income for women living in rural areas³⁷.

Although ecotourism is related to environmental protection, the development of ecotourism in Greece had little to do with the history and evolution of environmentalism in the country. Internationally, NGOs do play a significant role worldwide in the use of ecotourism for conservation, mainly through community-based approaches associated with protected areas in developing countries³⁸. However, in Greece, apart from the ecotourism centre in Dadia Forest Reserve in Northern Greece, which is primarily supported by WWF Greece³⁹, environmental NGOs have not used ecotourism as a conservation tool. Also, on the other hand, local ecotourism entrepreneurs in Greece do not cooperate with or consult environmental NGOs to develop their ecotourism activities⁴⁰. This could be possibly explained by the fact that environmentalism in Greece, although stronger compared to other aspects of civil society⁴¹, has traditionally been limited⁴².

However, despite its evolution as a tool to support sustainable tourism development in Greece, in most cases, ecotourism was used as 'buzzword' to attract customers or to attain economic objectives such as subsidies by the state through European Union's funds. With a few notable exceptions, most ecotourism enterprises in Greece, although referred to as such, do not comply with the ecotourism goals and criteria⁴³, reflecting both the low level of awareness in the local communities and the mismanagement of ecotourism in Greece. In particular, the bureaucratic nature of tourism administration in Greece further distorted the very concept of ecotourism. Lack of clear-cut definition in roles of regional and local authorities overlap in responsibilities of government departments and little accountability among them, as well as lack of information, qualified human resources, and financial resources, hindered the coordination for ecotourism tourism development approach in Greece. For instance, Ramsar and Natura 2000 sites consist of the most popular ecotourism areas in Greece, but there is no specific governance mechanism for

³⁷ IAKOVIDOU, Olga, TURNER, Karoline, «The female gender in Greek agritourism», in *Annals of Tourism Research*, XXII, 2/1995, pp. 481-484.

³⁸ ROMERO-BRITO, Tania P., BUCKLEY, Ralph Christopher, BYRNE, Jason Antony, «NGO Partnerships in Using Ecotourism for Conservation: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis», in *PLoS ONE*, XI, 11/2011, URL: < <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0166919> > [consultato il 19 agosto 2019].

³⁹ SVORONOU, Eleni, HOLDEN, Andrew, *op. cit.*

⁴⁰ SKANAVIS, Constantina, MATSINOS, Yiannis, PETRENITI, Vasiliki, «Environmental Education Potential for Greek Ecotourism», in *International Journal of Environmental Studies*, LXI, 6/2004, pp. 735-745.

⁴¹ KOUSIS, Maria, DELLA PORTA, Donatella, JIMENEZ-SANCHEZ, Manuel, «Southern European Environmental Movements in Comparative Perspective», in *American Behavioral Scientist*, LI, 11/2008, pp. 1627-1647.

⁴² KOUSIS, Maria, «Local environmental protest in Greece, 1974-94: exploring the political dimension», in *Environmental Politics*, XVI, 5/2007, pp. 785-804.

⁴³ SMITH, Athena, «Obstacles to the growth of alternative tourism in Greece», in *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism, and Leisure*, I, 3/2011, pp. 1-8, URL: < http://www.ajhtl.com/uploads/7/1/6/3/7163688/smith_a__article_5_13.pdf > [consultato il 19 agosto 2019]; AVGERINO-KOLONIAS, Sofia, TOUFENGOPOULOU, Anastasia, SPYROPOULUS, Ioannis, *op. cit.*

their management. A complicated and overlapping institutional framework exists that creates significant confusion about local and regional authorities' responsibilities⁴⁴.

The on-going economic crisis in Greece has further worsened this structural problem. From 2010 onwards, Greece has entered into a series of loan agreements and Economic Adjustment Programs, the bulk of which was used to repay the country's debt. These agreements, more widely known as Memoranda of Understanding, were signed between the Greek government and the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These Memoranda provide loans to the Greek government for the latter to pay off the debt above, while at the same time imposing upon the Greek population conditions of extreme austerity. The net results have been consumption inequality and declining average living standards, while reforms launched in the name of reducing labour costs, broadening the tax base or rationalizing the targeting of social benefits have had detrimental effects on the most vulnerable population groups in terms of socio-economic status⁴⁵.

The environment is being actively remade within the austerity framework through the creation of financial mechanisms that promote the fast and massive privatization of natural resources and state-owned assets, mainly public land⁴⁶. Under the debt-related discourse of 'national survival,' 'urgency,' and 'obligation,' there has been an escalation of land dispossession towards, among others, extractive, luxury tourism⁴⁷. The Greek state has a central role as market manager in facilitating 'strategic' tourism investment and releasing capital from the restrictions of environmental protection⁴⁸. Reforms in environmental and planning legislation also included exemptions from environmental assessment and permission to establish areas of mass tourism development within protected areas, as well as acceleration of environmental licensing procedures for large-scale projects without the necessary guarantees for setting reasonable timeframes for effective public participation procedures to be conducted and for a comprehensive assessment of the significant effects on the environment, so that citizens can have a substantive influence of the relevant process⁴⁹. The government's willingness to exploit and the private

⁴⁴ SAKELLARI, Maria, XIROUCHAKIS, Stavros, BAXEVANI, Kalliopi, PROBONAS, Michalis, «Wildlife poisoning in Crete and local interest groups' intention to engage in anti-poisoning actions», in *Biodiversity*, XVII, 3/2016, pp. 79-89.

⁴⁵ KAPLANOGLU, Georgia, RAPANOS, Vassilis T., «Evolutions in Consumption Inequality and Poverty in Greece: The Impact of the Crisis and Austerity Policies», in *The review of income and wealth*, LXIV, 1/2016, pp. 105-126.

⁴⁶ VELEGRAKIS, Giorgos, ANDRITSOS, Thanos, POULIOS, Dimitris, «Uneven Development: Lessons from the Ongoing Greek Tragedy», in *Human Geography – A New Radical Journal*, VIII, 3/2015, pp. 79-82.

⁴⁷ HADJIMICHALIS, Costis, «Crisis and Land Dispossession in Greece as Part of the Global 'Land Fever'», in *City*, XVIII, 4-5/2014, pp. 502-508.

⁴⁸ APOSTOLOPOULOU, Evangelia, ADAMS, William M., «Neoliberal Capitalism and Conservation in the Post-Crisis Era: The Dialectics of 'Green' and 'Un-Green' Grabbing in Greece and the UK», in *Antipode*, XLVII, 1/2015, pp. 15-35.

⁴⁹ KARAGEORGOU, Vicky, *The Fast-Track Authorization of Large-Scale RES Projects: An Acceptable Option?*, in

sector's willingness to invest on protected land not only opened up a route for new regulations to allow such developments but also legitimized past derogations allowing the post-facto legalization of large-scale investments within protected areas and further reduced the scope of ecotourism. At this point, it is worth noting that during the economic crisis and between 2008-2015, domestic tourism in Greece, which mainly supports ecotourism as many domestic travellers are engaged in ecotourism activities, experienced a significant shrinkage of 67%⁵⁰.

In the absence of government action to support environmental ethics, NGOs could play important roles, both raising awareness of the negative impact of mass tourism and advocating for policy reforms to support ecotourism development. However, to date, core environmental NGOs in Greece appear to be hesitant to develop either public awareness or policy advocacy campaigns aimed at addressing this conflict between tourism boom and sustainable use of natural resources. Most of the major environmental NGOs have promoted this change in minor ways rather than establishing dedicated campaigns on the issue. For instance, although NGOs in Greece have united in confronting the sweeping changes resulting from the austerity policies that are threatening environmental protection⁵¹, they have established a weak connection with local environmental activism which struggles to place environment on the agenda of the evolution of tourism. For instance, major NGOs in Greece failed to embrace local environmental grassroots activism in the island Crete that was developed in the late 2000s and continues against the establishment of one of the most extensive tourist development in the Mediterranean in one of the most arid places of Crete and Europe⁵².

Moreover, major Greek environmental NGOs have been in a particularly awkward position in relation to the EU as in previous decades blamed the government for not implementing EU conservation policy and, now environmental NGOs are seeking, in vain, to enlist EU support against the environmental impacts of rapid economic restructuring in Greece⁵³. This reality, as well as the endorsement of core environmental NGOs by dominant Greek political parties during the 90s and 00s (eg. Founder and director of the Greek branch of Greenpeace served as Vice Minister of Environment from 2000 to 2002, while the former Vice Minister of Environment was a member of the Greek green political party, with the latter being one of the partners of the

SQUINTANI, Lorenzo, VADDER, Hans, VANHEUSDEN, Bernard, REESE, Moritz (eds.), *Sustainable Energy in Diversity- Challenges and Approaches in Energy Transition in the European Union*, s.l., European environmental law forum, 2014, pp. 65-83, URL: <https://www.rug.nl/research/portal/files/15871416/First_EELF_Book_Sustainable_Energy_United_in_Diversity_1_.pdf> [consultato il 19 agosto 2019].

⁵⁰ ΙΚΚΟΣ, Αρης, ΚΟΥΤΣΟΣ, Σεραφείμ, *op. cit.*

⁵¹ LEKAKIS, Joseph N., KOUSIS, Maria, «Economic Crisis, Troika and the Environment in Greece», in *South European Society and Politics*, XVIII, 3/2013, pp. 305-331.

⁵² KÜTTING, Gabriela, *The Global Political Economy of the Environment and Tourism*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

⁵³ ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ, Evangelia, ADAMS, William, *op. cit.*

government coalition) and the criticism that NGOs have received during the last years for the splurge of public money, have also led the NGOs to distance themselves from local communities and active civil society.

This reality, along with increasing weakening of environmental legislation from the government, has led to the emergence of informal and non-hierarchical networks of environmental grassroots activism. From 2010, local environmental movements oppose large-scale private investments and privatization of public land in their areas and empower people to fight for a better quality of life. These movements include demonstrations against the damage to protected areas, such as Rhodes and Corfu communities' objection to the privatization of Prasonisi and Kassiopi protected areas. This is a qualitative change, as it points to the emergence of an independent, critical, and active civil society in comparison to the more traditional forms of volunteerism through NGOs⁵⁴. The rise of such groups has also a political dimension as well, as participants of informal organizations share and diffuses alternative conceptions of organizing social and economic life⁵⁵. Nevertheless, the remaining question to address is how this rise of environmental mobilizations can contribute to altering the current, austerity-driven, environmental governance reforms and support an ecotourism alternative to the exploitative use of environmental resources by the tourism industry. In what follows, the paper draws on the case of the Greek islands to discuss the implications for the future of ecotourism in the islands and the country in general. Then, based on these findings, it explores how the vision of ecotourism could be achieved.

3. Ecotourism in the Greek Islands

Tourism development in Greece is for its most significant part based on the numerous islands of the country. The Greek archipelago consists of ca. 7600 islands and islets in the Aegean Sea, more than 90% of which cover less than 10 km²⁵⁶ and ca. 300 islands and islets in the Ionian Sea. There are also a total of 86 islands exceeding 10 km² in size, such as the islands of Crete, Evia, and Rhodes. Among them are grouped into small islands, mainly in the Aegean archipelagoes of the Cyclades, Northern Sporades, and Dodecanese.

The preference for Greek islands is closely related to factors such as their geographical position in the Mediterranean Sea, favourable climatic conditions, diversity of natural habitats,

⁵⁴ FRANGONIKOLOPOULOS, Christos, «Economic crisis and civil society in Greece new forms of engagement & 'deviations' from the past», in *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, XVII, 1/201, pp. 150-153.

⁵⁵ SOTIROPOULOS, Dimitri, BOURIKOS, Dimitris, «Economic Crisis, Social Solidarity and the Voluntary Sector in Greece», in *Journal of Power, Politics & Governance*, II, 2/2014, pp. 33-53.

⁵⁶ TRIANTIS, Kostas, MYLONAS, Moysis, *Greek islands, biology*, in GILLESPIE, Rosemary, CLAGUE, David (eds.), *Encyclopedia of islands*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009, pp. 388-392.

unique local culture and aesthetics, and natural beauty. This has led to the rapid development of tourism activity in the last fifty years. As a result, tourism plays an economically significant role as a source of income and employment for local communities and has influenced the local economy but also population formation, local culture, and environment⁵⁷. In particular, for small islands, in which the scarcity of production factors limits development opportunities, tourism is considered as a development instrument to boost the local economy⁵⁸.

The scale and the form of tourism development are different for each Greek island. For example, accessibility is an essential factor for the number of tourists who are likely to visit an island but also for the type of tourists and the duration of stay⁵⁹. Big hotels, mass, and luxury tourism are found in islands with major ports and airports such as Crete and Rhodes, Kos, Santorini, and Mykonos. In smaller and more difficult to access islands, such as Anafi, Folegandros, and Koufonisia, tourism businesses are small and mainly family-owned, while those islands are mostly domestic tourism destinations. In overview, tourism has not been developed evenly across the Greek islands. For instance, tourism accounted for an estimated 25.7% of the GDP of the Region of South Aegean, 23% of the GDP of the Region of Crete and only 1.2% of the GDP of the Region of the North Aegean in 2017⁶⁰. This affected the human geography of the islands. Crete, Rhodes and in general islands in the South Aegean experienced a remarkable population and economic growth during the last fifty years due to the booming tourist industry, while North Aegean islands witnessed a demographic stagnation and are significantly less prosperous than their counterparts in the south⁶¹.

Moreover, during the recent refugee crisis in Europe, Aegean islands that were closer to the Turkish border, such as Lesbos, Chios, Samos, and Kos experienced a massive influx of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants within a short period, and this had mixed effects on the local tourism sector. In 2015, more than one million refugees, asylum seekers and migrants reached Europe during the most severe migration crisis since the Second World War⁶². As the refugee crisis unfolded in the Aegean Sea, the islands closer to the Turkish border were primarily exposed

⁵⁷ BUHALIS, Dimitrios, DIAMANTIS, Dimitrios, *Tourism development and sustainability on the Greek archipelagos*, in IOANNIDES, Dimitri, APOSTOLOPOULOS, Yiorgos, SONMEZ, Sevil (ed. by), *Mediterranean Islands and Sustainable Tourism. Development Practices, management and policies*, London, Continuum, 2001, pp. 143-170.

⁵⁸ CROES, Robertico, «A paradigm shift to a new strategy for small island economies: Embracing demand side economics for value enhancement and long term economic stability», in *Tourism Management*, XXVII, 3/2006, pp. 453-465.

⁵⁹ KARAMPELA, Sofia, KIZOS, Thanasis, SPILANIS, Ioannis, «Accessibility of islands: towards a new geography based on transportation modes and choices», in *Island Studies Journal*, IX, 2/2014, pp. 293-306.

⁶⁰ IKKOS, Aris, KOUTSOS, Serafim, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ GAVALAS, Vasilis, «Socio-economic development and educational level: parallel roots or not always? the case of the borderline islands of the Aegean Archipelago», in *Journal of Regional & Socio-economic issues*, VIII, 2/2018, pp. 16-28.

⁶² UNHCR, «Mid-year trends 2016», in *UNHCR - The UN Refugee Agency*, 2017, URL:

< <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unhcrstats/58aa8f247/mid-year-trends-june-2016.html> >
[consulted on 16 November 2019].

to this huge increase of people crossing borders to reach safety in Europe. For example, the island of Lesbos, with a population of about 80,000, received more than 200,000 refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants between May and September 2015⁶³. On March 2016, the European Union and Turkey agreed to a far-reaching migration control deal that represented a turning point in European migration policy. By closing the Greek entry-point, thousands of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants were entrapped in camps in the islands, as various European governments have imposed discriminatory border closures and caps on asylum applications. Besides the emergence of critical issues regarding human rights and ethics, this situation also had major implications for the tourism activity on these islands, as indicated by a significant deterioration of operational statistics⁶⁴. However, Pappas and Papatheodorou⁶⁵ showed that the emergence of a pro-refugee attitude in the islands allowed Greek accommodation providers to perceive the refugee crisis as an opportunity to promote a «culture of hospitality based on diversity, tolerance, and compassion»⁶⁶.

Over the years, environmental degradation, and adverse socio-economic and cultural changes within local communities are some of the problems that have been associated with the development of the conventional model of tourism in the Greek islands. In particular, the small islands are considered especially vulnerable entities due to their limited natural resources, carrying capacity, and susceptibility to natural disasters⁶⁷. For instance, salinization of groundwater is a frequent consequence of overexploitation of the aquifers to meet the increased water demand in the islands in the dry summer months⁶⁸. On the other hand, the islands' landscapes and geographical position underline their importance for birds and other wildlife. In particular, due to the sensitive natural characteristics of the Greek islands, large parts of favourite tourist locations such as Cyclades, Crete, and Dodecanese have acquired a protection status. For example, dozens of islets in the Aegean Sea, many areas in the Cyclades, including parts of Santorini and Paros, and a significant portion of the island of Crete are designated as special protection areas for wildlife.

⁶³ DINAS, Elias, MATAKOS, Konstantinos, HANGARTNER, Dominik et al., «Waking Up the Golden Dawn: Does Exposure to the Refugee Crisis Increase Support for Extreme-right Parties? Technical report Oxford University», in *LSE - The London School of Economics and Political Science*, 2017, URL: <<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100442/>> [consulted on 18 November 2019].

⁶⁴ IVANOV, Stanislav, STAVRINOUDIS, Theodoros Argyrios, «Impacts of the refugee crisis on the hotel industry: Evidence from four Greek islands», in *Tourism Management*, LXVII, 2018, pp. 214-223.

⁶⁵ PAPPAS, Nikolaos, PAPANOTODOROU, Andreas, «Tourism and the refugee crisis in Greece: Perceptions and decision-making of accommodation providers», in *Tourism Management*, LXIII, 2017, pp. 31-41.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

⁶⁷ VOGIATZAKIS, Ioannis, MANNION, Antoinette, PUGNETTI, Gloria, *Introduction to Mediterranean landscapes*, in VOGIATZAKIS, Ioannis, PUGNETTI, Gloria, MANNION, Antoinette (eds.), *Mediterranean Island Landscapes: Natural and Cultural Approaches*, Dodrecht, Springer Publishing, 2008, pp. 3-14.

⁶⁸ SAKELLARI, Maria, SKANAVIS, Constantina, *op. cit.*

Thus, the emergence of ecotourism in Greece in the 1990s provided an opportunity to protect biodiversity in the Greek islands through delivering financial benefits to local communities in and around protected areas, responding to the continuous pressure in natural resources from mass tourism. Ecotourism activities are mostly developed within protected areas such as Natura 2000 sites. For instance, in Lesvos island and Rhodes island, numerous tourists visit the islands' protected areas for bird watching during the birds' migration period⁶⁹. Similarly, the island of Zakynthos, and more particularly its national park, is a popular wildlife-watching tourist destination because of the guaranteed viewing of loggerhead turtles in the wild⁷⁰. Trekking paths and information kiosks can be found in many islands such as Santorini, Andros, Serifos, and Crete. A range of retreats and lodges has sprung up across the Greek islands, offering the chance to experience sustainable, eco-friendly living.

Assessment of the ecotourism impact on Greek islands economies (share in the gross regional product, employment, etc.) is difficult due to the lack of data, as this sector so far has not been referred to as a distinct industry neither has received adequate attention from the Greek state. One can assess the role of ecotourism in local islands' economies through the regional strategies of socio-economic development⁷¹. But, regional authorities have promoted ecotourism in minor ways rather than establishing dedicated policy tools. For instance, ecotourism is only mentioned once in the new smart specialization strategy and tourism branding strategy of the Region of Crete. Similarly, the Region of South Aegean, a region that includes many small islands among them Santorini and Mykonos, has funded the construction of hiking paths and other facilities that facilitate ecotourism development in the islands but still lacks of a concrete policy framework and a local strategy to support and enhance ecotourism practices and initiatives in the Region.

Even if the activity appears to improve incomes, most of the ecotourism practices in the Greek islands operate in the margin of mass tourism. Mass tourism development facilitates the emergence of nature-friendly activities that enrich its product, but this does not allow a change in the dominant tourism development pattern. In a context dominated by mass tourism, most ecotourism activities depend on mass tourism facilities to attract participants or house their guests. For example, in Crete, hundreds of tourists visit and hike at the protected area of Samaria

⁶⁹ CHATZIGEORGIOU, Chryssoula, SIMELLI, Ioanna, TSAGARIS, Apostolos, «Bird Watching and Ecotourism: An Innovative Monitoring System to Project the Species of Lesvos Island to Potential Ecotourists», *Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies in Agriculture, Food and Environment (HAICTA 2015)*, Kavala (Greece), 17-20 September 2015; SPANOU, Sofia, TSEGENIDI, Kyriaki, GEORGIADIS, Theodoros, «Perception of Visitors' Environmental Impacts of Ecotourism: A case study in the Valley of Butterflies protected area, Rhodes Island, Greece», in *International Journal of Environmental Research*, VI, 1/2012, pp. 245-258.

⁷⁰ SCHOFIELD, Gail, SCOTT, Rebecca, KATSELIDIS, Kostas et al., «Quantifying wildlife-watching ecotourism intensity on an endangered marine vertebrate», in *Animal conservation*, XVIII, 6/2015, pp. 517-528.

⁷¹ NIKOLAEVA, Julia Vadimovna, BOGOLIUBOVA, Natalia Mikhailovna, SHIRIN, Sergey Sergeevich, «Ecological tourism in the state image policy structure. Experience and problems of modern Russia», in *Current issues in Tourism*, XXI, 5/2018, pp. 547-566.

Gorge every day during summertime, but most of them are staying at the big hotels in the North part of the island. Similarly, recent work on agrotourism in the Greek islands shows how most of the agrotourism enterprises operate on the sidelines of mass tourism, without clear links to local agricultural production, local products, environment and cultural landscapes⁷².

Ecotourism in the Greek islands is facing many challenges. There is empirical evidence that many ecotourism enterprises in Aegean islands and Crete have adopted the name but not the essence of ecotourism⁷³. For example, cases of using ecotourism and agrotourism as «buzzwords» to fascinate customers are spotted in Crete, Lesvos, and Lefkada⁷⁴. Moreover, local protected areas, by and large, cannot provide visitors with a more or less broad spectrum of ecotourism services. This is, among others, due to the poor infrastructure such as means of transport and hotels that meet the green standards of hospitality, lack of information concerning environmental routes, lack of trained and specialized personnel and lack of funding. For instance, Arabatzis and Grigoroudis⁷⁵ document tourists' dissatisfaction with ecotourism facilities and infrastructure in Greece, as they do not meet their expected standards.

Tourism in sensitive and fragile ecosystems may not come without a cost⁷⁶. There is empirical evidence of ecotourism activities in the Greek islands that benefit neither conservation nor local communities. For instance, in Rhodes island, overcrowding of the protected Valley of Butterflies visiting the area has generated, over the years, a series of negative impacts on the natural environment, mainly due to improper visitor behaviour⁷⁷. The net benefits from such conservation are low and occasionally negative for local communities.

4. Implications for the future

Greece is not the only EU country affected by austerity policies; however, it is the only member state that has undergone the lengthiest and most intensive programs of austerity in the Eurozone⁷⁸. As the Greek government is trying to boost the tourism industry in search of additional income, one needs to assess whether the current national developmental and economic policies may indeed help the situation or whether they loom the potential for further losses.

⁷² KARAMPELA, Sofia, KIZOS, Thanasis, SPILANIS, Ioannis, «Evaluating the impact of agritourism on local development in small islands», in *Island Studies Journal*, XI, 1/2016, pp. 161-176.

⁷³ SMITH, Athena, *op. cit.*

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*; KIZOS, Thanasis, IOSIFIDES, Theodoros, «The contradictions of agrotourism development in Greece: Evidence from three case studies», in *South European Society and Politics*, XII, 1/2007, pp. 59-77.

⁷⁵ ARABATSIS, Garyfallos, GRIGOROUDIS, Evangelos, «Visitors' satisfaction, perceptions and gap analysis: The case of Dadia-Lefkimi-Soufliou National Park», in *Forest Policy and Economics*, XII, 3/2009, pp. 163-172.

⁷⁶ DAS, Madhumita, CHATTERYEE, Bani, «Ecotourism: A panacea or a predicament?», in *Tourism Management Perspectives*, XIV, 3/2015, pp. 3-16.

⁷⁷ SPANO, Sofia, TSEGENIDI, Kyriaki, GEORGIADIS, Theodoros, *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ KAPLANOGLU, Georgia, RAPANOS, Vassilis T., *op. cit.*

Owing to the increasing negativities of mass tourism, ecotourism can create significant opportunities for environmental conservation and sustainable development by providing financial benefits to the locals in and around protected areas. This transformation tends to be treated as apolitical in policy circuits, but in that way reproduces existing structures of power and domination and justifies business as usual⁷⁹. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of Greece. It is impossible to reconcile effective crisis management, which relies on the privatization of public property, deregulation, and Memoranda-imposed legislation, with the sustainable development mechanisms designed to preserve the natural environment and enforce autonomy and accountability.

But even the potential benefits of ecotourism can lead to negative impacts on a protected area and local communities without planning and management that balance environmental, social, and economic objectives⁸⁰. In the Greek islands, the weak and dysfunctional administrative framework of protected areas management risks to eroding the natural capital that visitors travel to see⁸¹. Lack of clear conceptualization of ecotourism as well as infrastructure and policy tools inadequate for ecotourism create further drawbacks.

Engaging tourism stakeholders in creating solutions to environmental challenges can be a remedy to the unsustainable practices of ecotourism⁸². The literature on sustainable tourism shows how participatory approaches can improve the professional basis of tourism development planning, reflect and satisfy needs of local people in a better way and secure conservation of local resources as well as developing a more democratic local community⁸³. In Greece, although people's perceptions about protected sites are diverse, complex and often contradictory, past studies have recorded a willingness of local communities to become more involved in the environmental management of local protected areas⁸⁴.

Given that education is one of the vital social strategies for conservation⁸⁵, planning and management of ecotourism areas should be accompanied by education programs related to the sustainable use of natural and cultural resources⁸⁶. Education will help tourism stakeholders and the local community to obtain a stronger understanding of the tourism actual environmental

⁷⁹ BLYTHE, Jessica, SILVER, Jennifer, EVANS, Louisa et al., *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ DAS, Madhumita, CHATTERYEE, Bani, *op. cit.*

⁸¹ SAKELLARI, Maria, XIROUCHAKIS, Stavros, BAXEVANI, Kalliopi, PROBONAS, Michalis, *op. cit.*

⁸² DAS, Madhumita, CHATTERYEE, Bani, *op. cit.*

⁸³ SAKELLARI, Maria, SKANAVIS, Constantina, *op. cit.*; SAKELLARI, Maria, «Film tourism and ecotourism: mutually exclusive or compatible?», *cit.*

⁸⁴ SAKELLARI, Maria, XIROUCHAKIS, Stavros, BAXEVANI, Kalliopi, PROBONAS, Michalis, *op. cit.*; APOSTOLOPOULOU, Evangelia, ADAMS, William, *op. cit.*

⁸⁵ FIEN, John, SCOTT, William, TILBURY, Daniella, «Education and Conservation: Lessons from an evaluation», in *Environmental Education Research*, VII, 4/2001, pp. 379-395.

⁸⁶ SAKELLARI, Maria, SKANAVIS, Constantina, *op. cit.*; SKANAVIS, Constantina, SAKELLARI, Maria, «International tourism, domestic tourism and environmental change: Environmental Education can find the balance», in *Tourismos*, VI, 1/2011, pp. 233-249

impacts and that their participation in the environmental decision-making process has the potential to influence policy formation and finally, to empower them to make decisions throughout the process⁸⁷. The field of environmental education for long has mainly been treated only as a tool for managing the interaction of tourists with the natural environment. However, the time has come to acknowledge its potential to raise environmental awareness of tourism stakeholders, empower partnerships among them, and alter their behaviours towards ecotourism development⁸⁸. But, this also requires enhancing the inclusive nature of public participation in environmental governance and creating opportunities for more meaningful and democratic environmental policy processes, if a social and policy shift towards ecotourism is to be possible.

Ecotourism's potential role as an agent for local development depends on effective policies and programs in the local context that have the approval and support of the local population. To deliver such benefits, however, requires that people be trained not only for facilitating conservation work, but also for professional development in the context of ecotourism-related activities⁸⁹. Greece has a school for national parks and recreation area caretaker guides, offered by public and private vocational training institutes, under the auspices of the Greek Organization of Vocational Education and Training. But, the number of graduates of these programs is small, and the vast majority of guides in the ecotourism sector in Greece lack formal training⁹⁰. Moreover, although local communities have primarily endorsed ecotourism⁹¹, the only place that recruits local inhabitants as ecotourism guides, is Dadia Forest Reserve. These guides are trained locally by WWF Greece, the primary administrator of the local nature centre.

5. Conclusions

This paper is the first to review the history and the efficacy of ecotourism in Greece. Using the paradigmatic case of the Greek islands, it shows how ecotourism is used more as an instrument for revenue generation and less for environmental conservation. In particular, the term 'ecotourism' is used to attract tourists and government funding and thereby generate more income, while protected areas are poorly managed with their current infrastructure inadequate

⁸⁷ BYRD, Erick, «Stakeholders in sustainable tourism development and their roles: applying stakeholder theory to sustainable tourism development», in *Tourism Review*, LXII, 2/2007, pp. 6-13; BYRD, Erick, BOSLEY, Holly, DRONBERGER, Meghan, «Comparisons of stakeholder perceptions of tourism impacts in rural eastern North Carolina», in *Tourism Management*, XXX, 5/2013, pp. 693-700.

⁸⁸ SAKELLARI, Maria, SKANAVIS, Constantina, *op. cit.*

⁸⁹ FIEN, John, SCOTT, William, TILBURY, Daniella, *op. cit.*

⁹⁰ SKANAVIS, Constantina, GIANNOULIS, Christos, *op. cit.*

⁹¹ SKANAVIS, Constantina, MATSINOS, Yiannis, PETRENITI, Vasiliki, *op. cit.*; SKANAVIS, Constantina, GIANNOULIS, Christos, *op. cit.*; KORFIATIS, Konstantinos, HOVARDAS, Tasos, TSALIKI, E. et al., «Rural children's views on human activities and changes in a Greek wetland», in *Society and Natural Resources*, XXII, 4/2009, pp. 339-352.

for ecotourism. There has been seemingly little action by the national government and regional policy bodies to promote ecotourism in a meaningful and productive way. Moreover, during the financial crisis in Greece and under the rules of the Economic Adjustment Programs, the legislative framework in the field of environmental protection has been reformed to give priority to business and facilitate large-scale investments. A rapid transformation of the business environment occurred that enables private capital to appropriate nature in ways that had previously been resisted by local communities⁹². This has brought tremendous pressures to the natural environment, hampering habitats and wildlife and eroding the natural capital that visitors travel to see.

This paper aims to stimulate closer consideration of the diverse social, structural, and political dimension of ecotourism development. A participatory tourism development approach, environmental education and capacity building for the professional development of local communities in the context of environmental conservation and ecotourism, can help to provide an alternative to the exploitative use of environmental resources and support the transfer of the tangible benefits of ecotourism to local communities. This paper underscores that there is an apparent conflict of interests between austerity policies and sustainability governance. This is amplified exponentially when both sustainable tourism strategies and austerity-driven reforms unfold in an environmental context. Thus, this vision of sustainable tourism and ecotourism development should be founded on new schemes and policies for Greece incorporating citizenship rights, challenging market individualism towards a common environmental good concept and deepening representation and transparency.

⁹² KONSTANTINIDIS, Charalampos, VLACHOU, Andriana, «Appropriating Nature in Crisis-ridden Greece: The Rationale of Capitalist Restructuring – Part 1», in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, XXVIII, 4/2017, pp. 48-61; IID., «Appropriating Nature in Crisis-ridden Greece: The Rationale of Capitalist Restructuring – Part 2», XXIX, 2/2018, pp. 108-121.

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